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(11)

EP 0 721 176 A2

(12)

EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION

B44

(43) Date of publication:
10.07.1996 Bulletin 1996/28

(51) Int Cl.6: G09F 9/37

(21) Application number: 96300044.3

(22) Date of filing: 03.01.1996

(84) Designated Contracting States:
DE FR GB

(72) Inventor: Sheridan, Nicholas K.
Los Altos, California 94022 (US)

(30) Priority: 03.01.1995 US 368120

(74) Representative: Johnson, Reginald George et al
Rank Xerox Ltd
Patent Department
Parkway
Marlow Buckinghamshire SL7 1YL (GB)

(71) Applicant: XEROX CORPORATION
Rochester New York 14644 (US)

(54) A display medium

(57) Bichromal balls (15) have two hemispheres, typically one black and one white, each having different electrical properties. Each ball (15) is enclosed within a spherical shell and then a space between the ball and shell is filled with a liquid (14) to form a microsphere so

that the ball is free to rotate in response to an electrical field. The microspheres can then be mixed into a substrate which can be formed into sheets or can be applied to any kind of surface. The result is a film which can form an image from an applied electrical field.

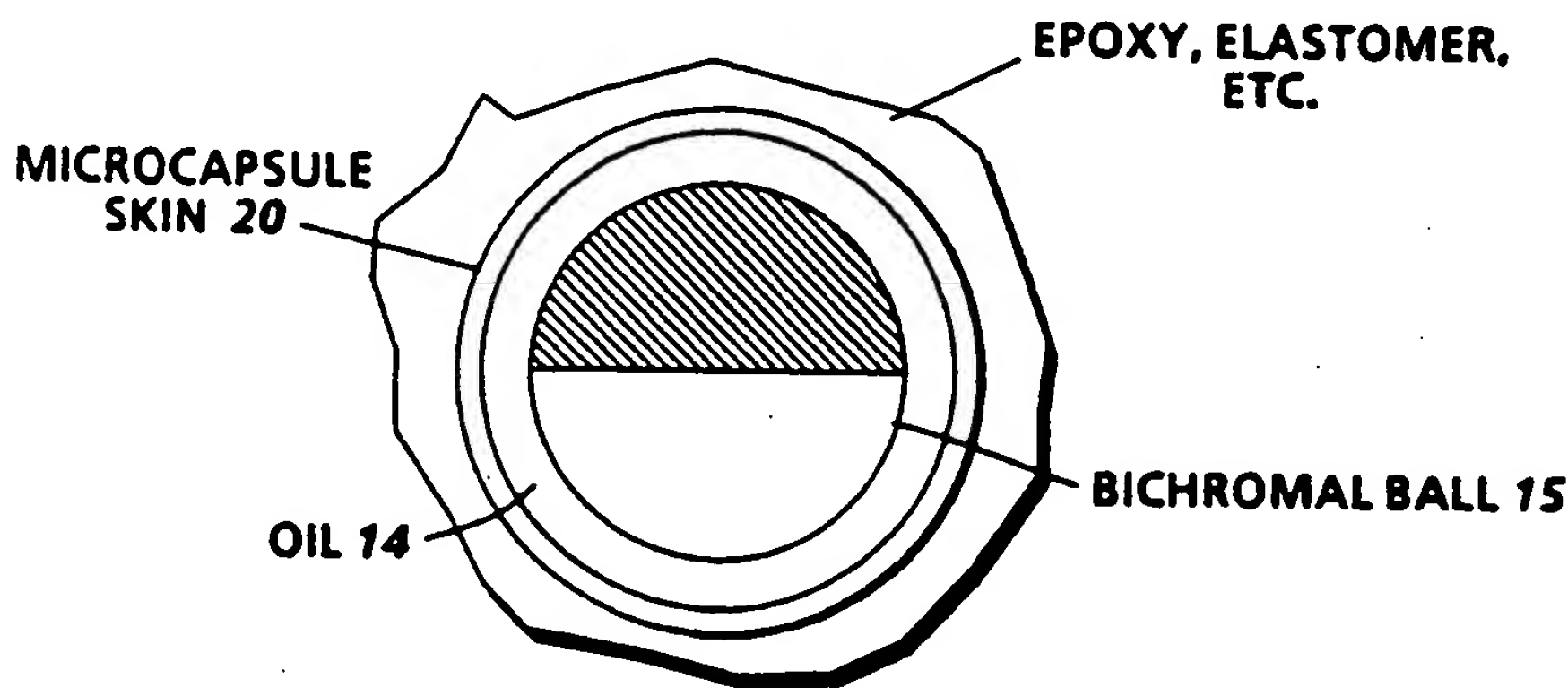


FIG. 4

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Description

The present invention relates to a display medium and, more particularly, to a "twisting ball" medium for displaying an image.

US-A-4.126.854 and US-A-4.143.103 describe a display system in which the display panel is comprised of spherical balls which have an optical and an electrical anisotropy due to each hemisphere surface having a different color and electrical charge in contact with a liquid. These spherical particles are imbedded in a solid substrate and a slight space between each ball and the substrate is filled with a liquid so that the balls are free to rotate, in a changing electrical field, but can not migrate from one location to another. If one hemisphere is black and the other is white, each pixel can be turned on and off by the electrical field applied to that location. Each pixel can be individually addressed, and a full page image can thus be generated.

Most commonly the solid substrate used in this display is a gel, typically a silicone gel. The purpose of using this material lies in the remarkably large expansion in volume exhibited by gels when soaked in certain liquids, which we refer to as plasticizing liquids. 30% expansions are not uncommon when soaked in silicone oils. The bichromal balls do not expand when contacted by the plasticizing oil, so a spherical cavity opens up around each ball when the gel is immersed in a plasticizing liquid. This space fills with the plasticizing liquid.

After being soaked in plasticizer, the gel is soft and lacks durability, and must be bonded between glass or plastic sheets for protection. This process has the disadvantages that a large number of steps are required for the fabrication, adding to the cost, and that the final product lacks some of the optical and tactile properties of paper, which it emulates in some embodiments. It will be seen that significant advantages will further accrue when the limitations to planar geometries are removed. A product that does not require the use of bonding sheets would be desirable.

Historically there have been several approaches to the problem of isolating twisting balls for displays. Lee (L.L. Lee, "Matrix-Addressed Magnetic Particles Display", IEEE Trans. on Elect. Devices, Vol. ED-22, No. 9, Sept 1975) created a honeycomb type of structure in which the balls were contained in separate compartments which were an integral part of the substrate. Such a structure was inherently expensive to make and effectively limited the ball sizes that could be used. Later, Saitoh et al (M. Saitoh, T. Mori, R. Ishikawa, and H. Tamura, "A Newly Developed Electrical Twisting Ball Display", Proc. of the SID, Vol. 23/4, 1982) developed an isolation technique in which the individual balls were coated with a resin and subsequently dispersed in a poly vinyl alcohol substrate. After the PVA was hardened it was immersed in a solvent that had minimal effect on the PVA but that dissolved the resin around the balls, leaving them free to rotate. Once again, this is an expensive pro-

cedure that would be difficult to implement on large scale. The most successful approach to date was that of Sheridan, described in U. S. Patent 4,143,103 referenced above and described in the last two paragraphs.

One of the objects of the present invention is to strive to provide the fabrication of very thin sheets of display materials having more paper-like properties than were possible with the prior art techniques.

Accordingly, the present invention provides a display medium and a plurality of methods as defined in the appended claims.

The bichromal balls are individually enclosed in spherical shells with the space between the two spherical surfaces filled with dielectric liquid. The resultant capsules may be dispersed in a second liquid, such as an optically clear epoxy, which may be subsequently hardened. If the hardened liquid, now a solid, is of sufficient strength no further protection is required. The resultant display is then in the form of a thin, paper-like sheet without the bulkiness and optical problems created by the protective cover sheets as in the prior art. Alternatively, the resultant display may be easily conformally coated on a non-planar surface for even greater flexibility of applications.

The present invention will be described further, by way of examples, with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:-

Fig 1 is a cross section of a prior art version of a twisting ball display:

Fig 2 is an enlarged view of the prior art bichromal ball surrounded by plasticizing oil:

Fig 3 shows a plurality of capsules dispersed in a substrate:

Fig 4 is a cross section of a capsule of Fig 3:

Fig 5 is a bichromal ball before coating;

Fig 6 is a bichromal ball after coating;

Fig 7 shows a bichromal ball immersed in dielectric liquid;

Fig 8 shows the finished microcapsule; and

Fig 9 shows one method of encapsulating bichromal balls.

Figure 1 is a cross section of the prior art version of this twisting ball display. A large number of bichromal balls 11 are mixed into an uncured elastomer which is subsequently spread into a thin layer 10 and cured to form a solid sheet of elastomer. Next this elastomer is soaked in a plasticizing oil which swells the elastomer but generally does not effect the bichromal balls. The result is that a spherical cavity 13 opens up around each bichromal ball, and this cavity subsequently fills with the plasticizing liquid. Finally the plasticized elastomer is bonded between two protective, transparent sheets of plastic or glass, 12, one or both of which might have a transparent conducting coating. Figure 2 is an enlarged view of the bichromal ball 15 surrounded by plasticizing oil 14 within a cavity in elastomer 16.

The substrate material used in the prior art twisting ball display was largely limited to the class of elastomer materials, because these materials undergo the greatest extent of swelling when plasticized and thus form cavities of adequate size.

This invention is the improvement of using a separate encapsulating shell to enclose both the bichromal ball and a sufficient thickness of dielectric oil 14 to allow free rotation of the bichromal ball. These capsules then constitute voltage sensitive members that may be dispersed in any medium across which an electrical field may be impressed. Most commonly this medium will be a solid, with the balls dispersed in this solid while it is in a liquid phase. It will be subsequently hardened, by chemical reaction, by cooling, etc. The medium may also be a liquid, or a slurry consisting of a liquid and solid particles, or solid particles whose purpose might be to immobilize the capsules. Indeed, any medium might be used to contain the capsules provided that it does not damage the protective shell of the capsule or diffuse undesirable chemicals across the shell. These voltage sensitive members will then indicate the voltage condition at their locations. When used in conjunction with an addressing means they can constitute an information display. Other uses might include the visualization or measurement of local electrical fields in test systems.

This invention allows the substrate material to be made from a very large number of dielectric materials that are obtained by hardening a liquid phase of the material into which the bichromal balls in liquid-filled shells have been dispersed. In general the shells will permit chemical isolation of the hardenable material from the encapsulated liquid, providing great freedom in choosing the substrate material.

The process of enclosing the bichromal balls and the oil layer in individual capsules is a form of microencapsulation. There is a rich scientific and patent literature on microencapsulation. It is generally discussed in "Microcapsule Processing and Technology" by Asaji Kondo, 1979, Marcel Dekker, Inc. Two particular methods that are especially appropriate to this use are discussed here. An individual capsule is illustrated in Figure 4 and a plurality of such capsules dispersed in a substrate is shown in Figure 3.

A bichromal ball 15 as shown in Figure 5 is coated uniformly to result in a coated ball as shown in Figure 6. The coating may be of Parylene (a product of the Union Carbide Corp.) and take place in a vacuum chamber. It may be a polymer which is dissolved in a solvent and precipitated onto the ball by means of a temperature change, a pH change, etc. A process such as this is discussed by Wei-Hsin Hou in "Polymer-Encapsulated particles with Controlled Morphologies: Preparation, Characterization and Application", PhD Thesis, Lehigh University, 1991, UMI Dissertation Service, University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Mich. It may be a hardenable liquid such as an epoxy and deposited as a mist or in a tumbling situation such as in a fluidized bed. It

may be a polymer and deposited by means of an electrostatic painting process.

After the coating is applied, the bichromal balls are immersed in dielectric liquid 14, as shown in Figure 7, which has a chemical affinity for the coating and plasticizes it, causing it to swell. This process will also drive the liquid into the space between the ball and the shell, at least partially filling it. Subsequently placing the microcapsules thus formed into a second liquid that diffuses more rapidly through the shell than the first liquid will tend to more fully fill the space within the shell. The finished product is shown in Figure 8, and is ready to be mixed into the hardenable substrate.

A second approach, discussed in Kondo's work, relies on the well-known fact that when drops of certain liquids are placed in other liquids, an interface skin will rapidly form between the two liquids. A subset of this is called interfacial polymerization and is used to fabricate certain polymers. One method of using this phenomenon to encapsulate bichromal balls with a dielectric liquid layer is shown in Figure 9. On the left side of the apparatus the balls 15 are mixed with the liquid 31 in the pipe 30. They are ejected from the nozzle 32 under such conditions that each ball is separate and is coated with the dielectric liquid to a predetermined thickness. As these fall into the tank 33, the chemical reaction between the dielectric liquid and the film forming liquid creates a tough film over and fully encapsulates the ball, including the dielectric liquid. These are removed from the tank and dried for use.

The microcapsules formed by these processes need only be strong enough to hold up to the process of being mixed with the hardenable transparent material used to form the sheet of electric paper. Such transparent materials include epoxies and polymers having an end state as solids, gels and elastomers. In other cases, such as where the microcapsules are used to determine electrical fields, stronger structures may be required.

A particularly useful application of this technology is to mix the capsules containing the bichromal balls with a transparent hardenable material, such as a varnish, and to paint the resulting dispersion onto a surface, which may be non-planar. In this way one may not only obtain display surfaces that conform to objects of any shape, but one also obtains articles of decoration or camouflage. Simply applying electrical fields will cause such surfaces to change color, inexpensively. Useful surfaces include structural members and fabrics, especially articles of clothing. In addition to being dispersed in the volume of a liquid that is subsequently hardened, the microcapsules can also be adhered to adhesives that are coated onto surfaces, typically forming monolayers. Thus, for example, an article of clothing could be coated with an adhesive and subsequently microcapsules could be adhered to the adhesive. Thereafter the color of that article of clothing could be altered by the application of electrical fields. Likewise, the surface of an object that there is an intention to conceal could be coated

with a monolayer of microcapsules and a spatially varying voltage could be applied to these microcapsules to control the pattern of color on the surface of that object.

This invention is then highly advantaged over prior art methods of providing isolation cavities for the bichromal balls used in twisting ball displays to rotate. It is an inherently low cost technique that allows a wide choice of substrate materials and that can be applied to a large variety of planar and non-planar surfaces. It will allow the fabrication of very thin sheets of display materials having more paper-like properties than were possible with prior art methods.

Claims

1. A display medium comprising:

a plurality of bichromal balls (15), each having two hemispheric surfaces, one surface differing from the other in both color and electrical characteristics,
a layer of liquid (14) surrounding each ball (15),
a skin (20) of a first compound surrounding the layer of liquid (14) to form a microcapsule, and
a substrate of a second compound (10) in contact with said microcapsules.

2. A display medium as claimed in Claim 1, wherein said substrate is either a solid or a liquid.

3. A method of measuring the distribution of an electrical field of a structure by distributing the medium, as claimed in Claim 1 or Claim 2, within the field, and allowing the electrical field to selectively rotate the balls to form an image of the field.

4. A method as claimed in Claim 3, wherein said substrate is adhered to a planar surface, or is adhered to a non-planar surface, wherein said substrate is applied as a paint.

5. A display medium as claimed in Claim 1 or Claim 2, wherein:

said second compound is in the form of an adhesive layer bonding the microcapsules to a surface.

6. A display medium as claimed in Claim 5, wherein said adhesive layer is hardenable or wherein said adhesive layer is a liquid.

7. A display medium as claimed in Claim 5 or Claim 6, wherein said microcapsules are bonded as a monolayer with the free surface of said adhesive layer.

8. A display medium as claimed in Claim 7, wherein said surface is a fabric.

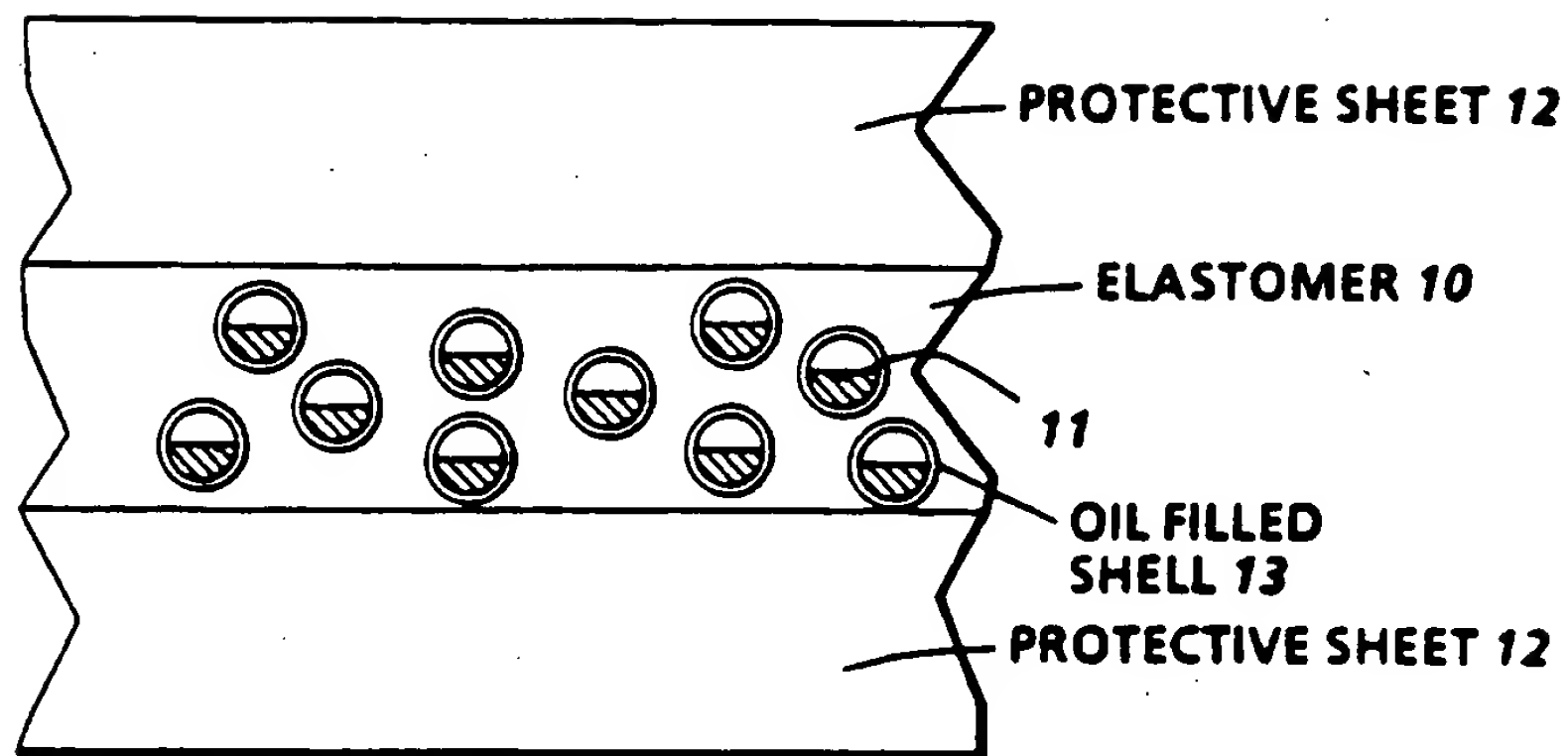
9. A method of creating microcapsules comprising:

creating a plurality of bichromal balls (15), each having two hemispheric surfaces, one surface differing from the other in both color and electrical characteristics.

coating each bichromal ball with a layer of a first compound to form a number of separated coated balls, and

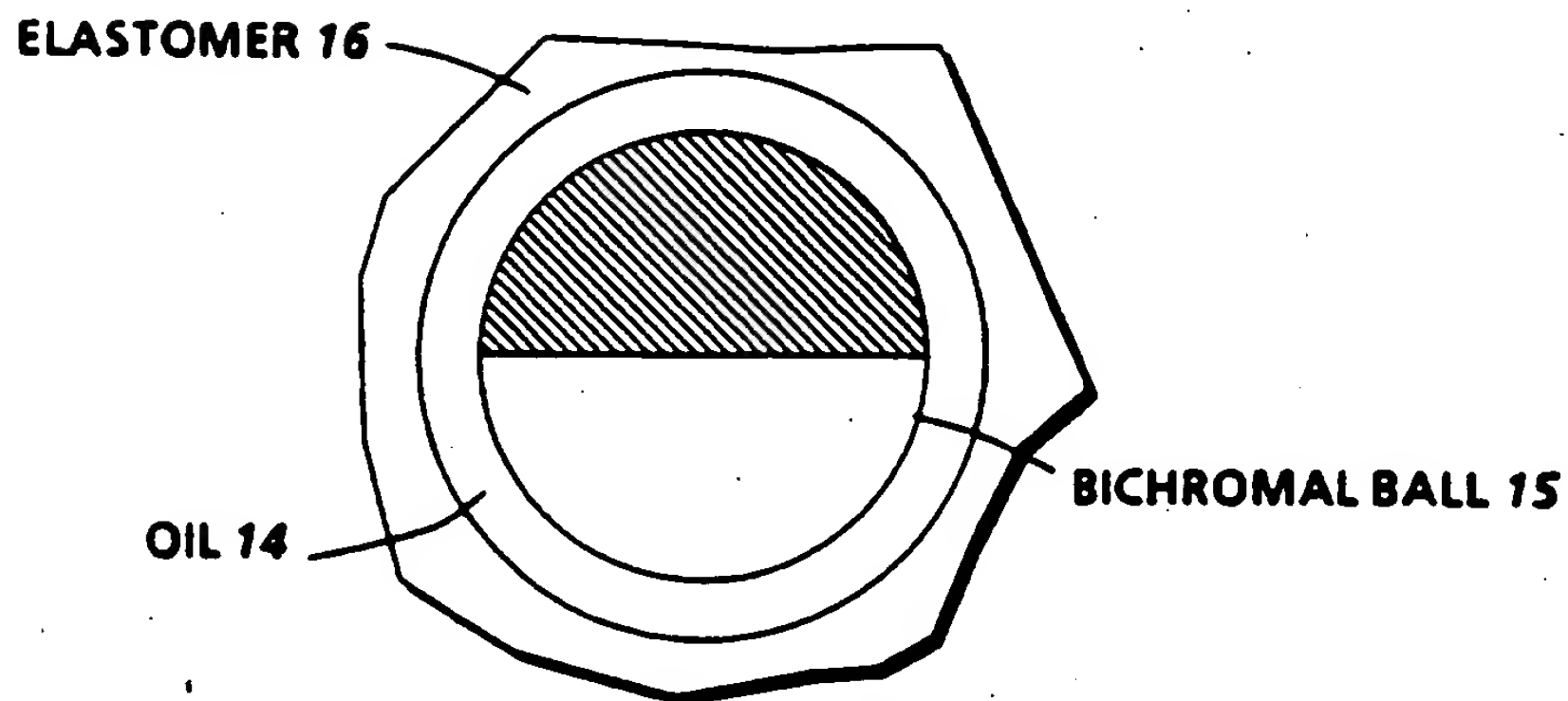
placing said separated coated bichromal balls in a liquid to cause said coating to swell and to transport a portion of said liquid between the swelled coating and the bichromal ball to create a liquid-filled space.

10. A method as claimed in Claim 9, further comprising, after said placing step, the step of placing said balls into a second liquid to cause further swelling and further transport of liquid into said space.



PRIOR ART

FIG. 1



PRIOR ART

FIG. 2

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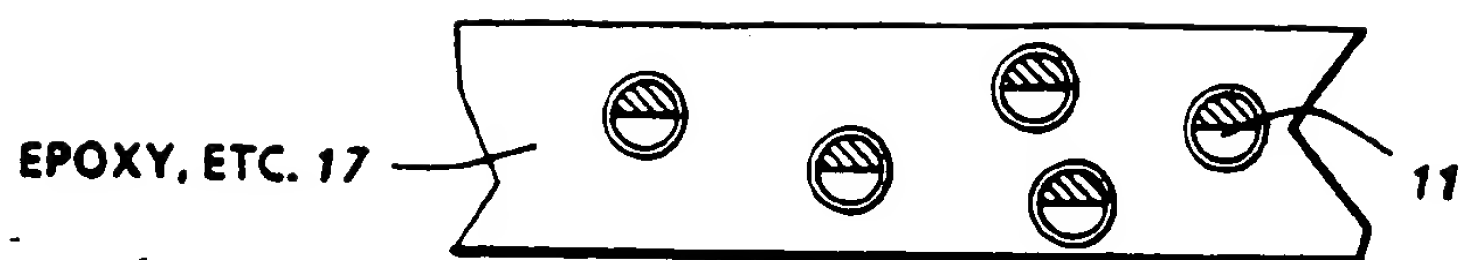


FIG. 3

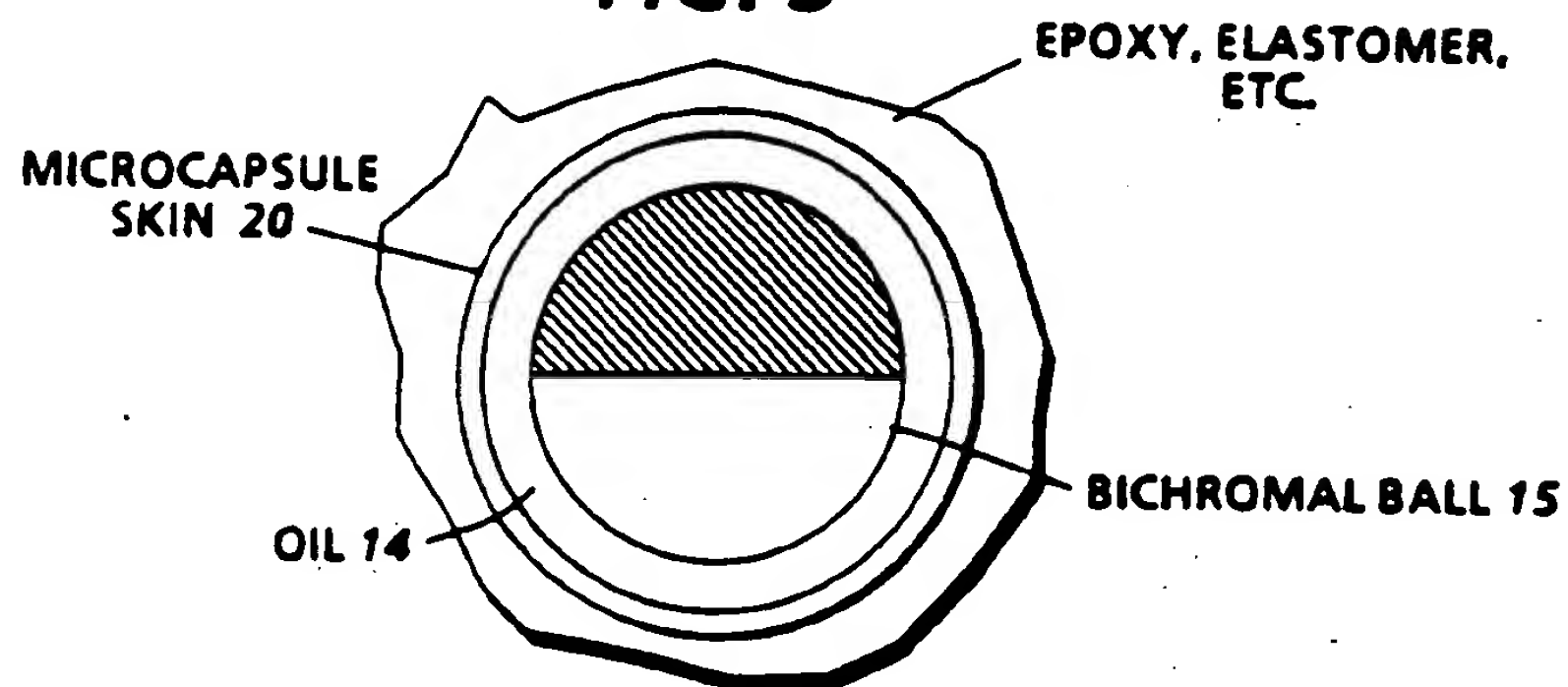


FIG. 4

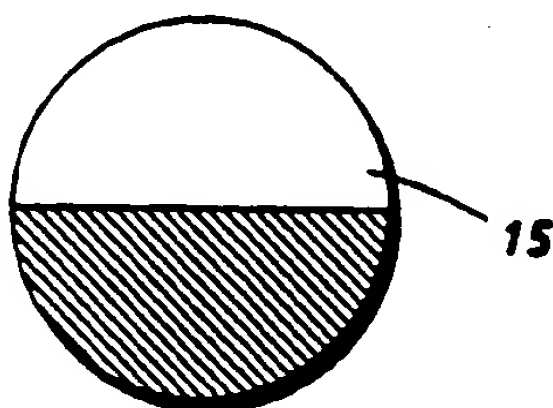


FIG. 5

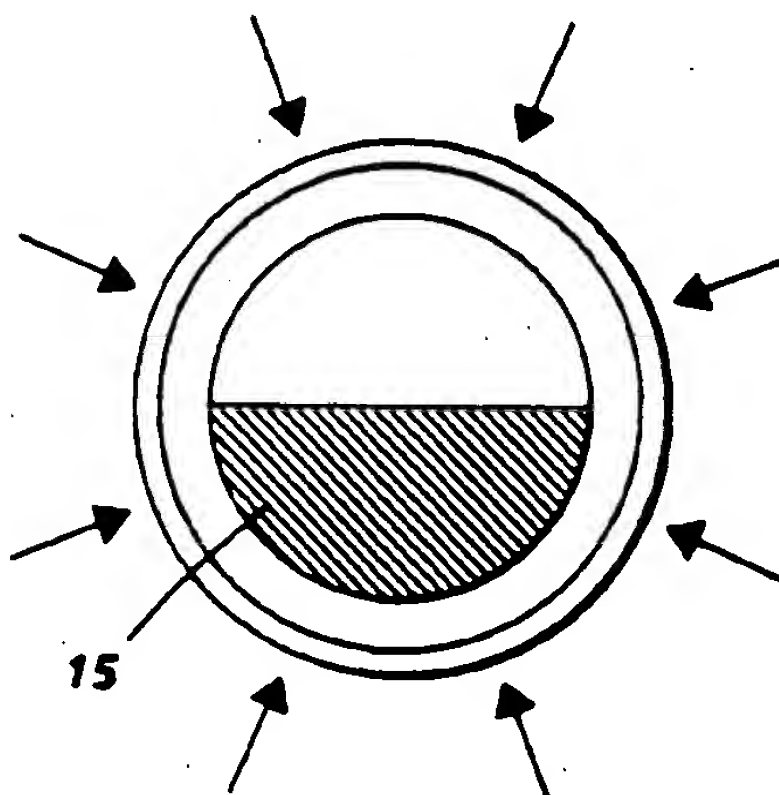


FIG. 6

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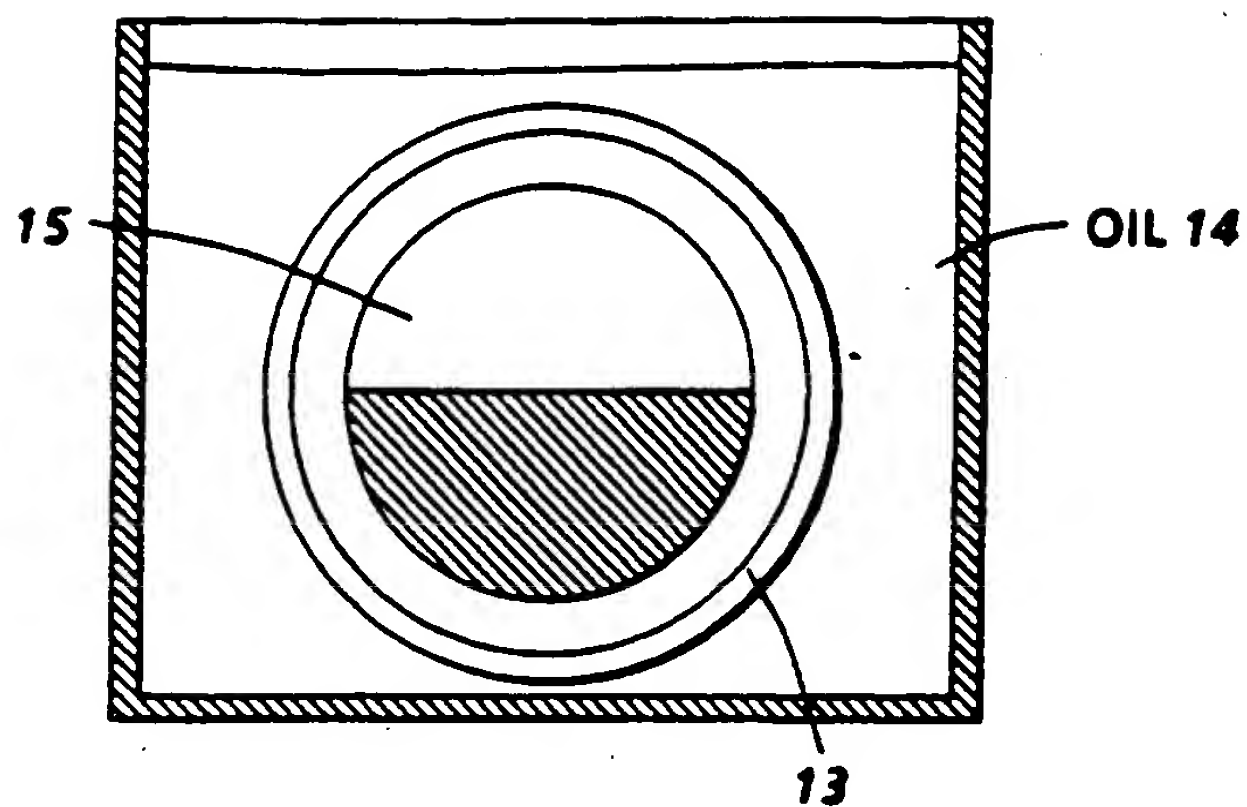


FIG. 7

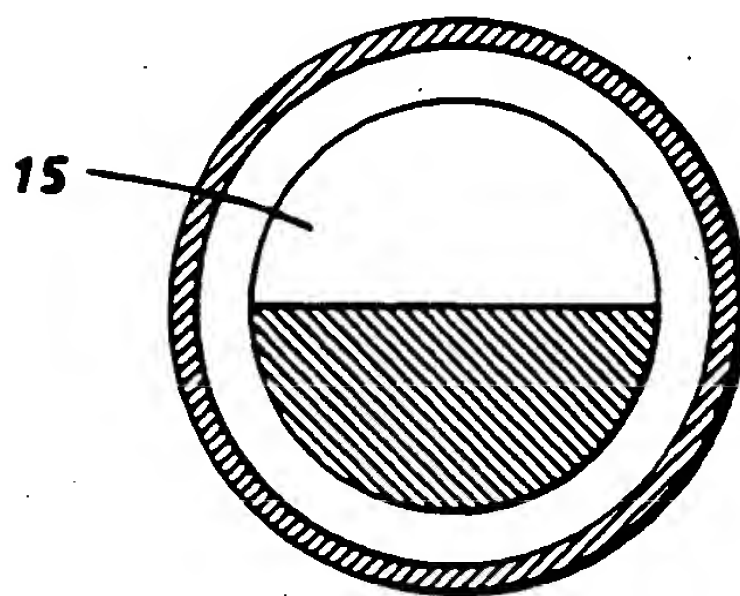


FIG. 8

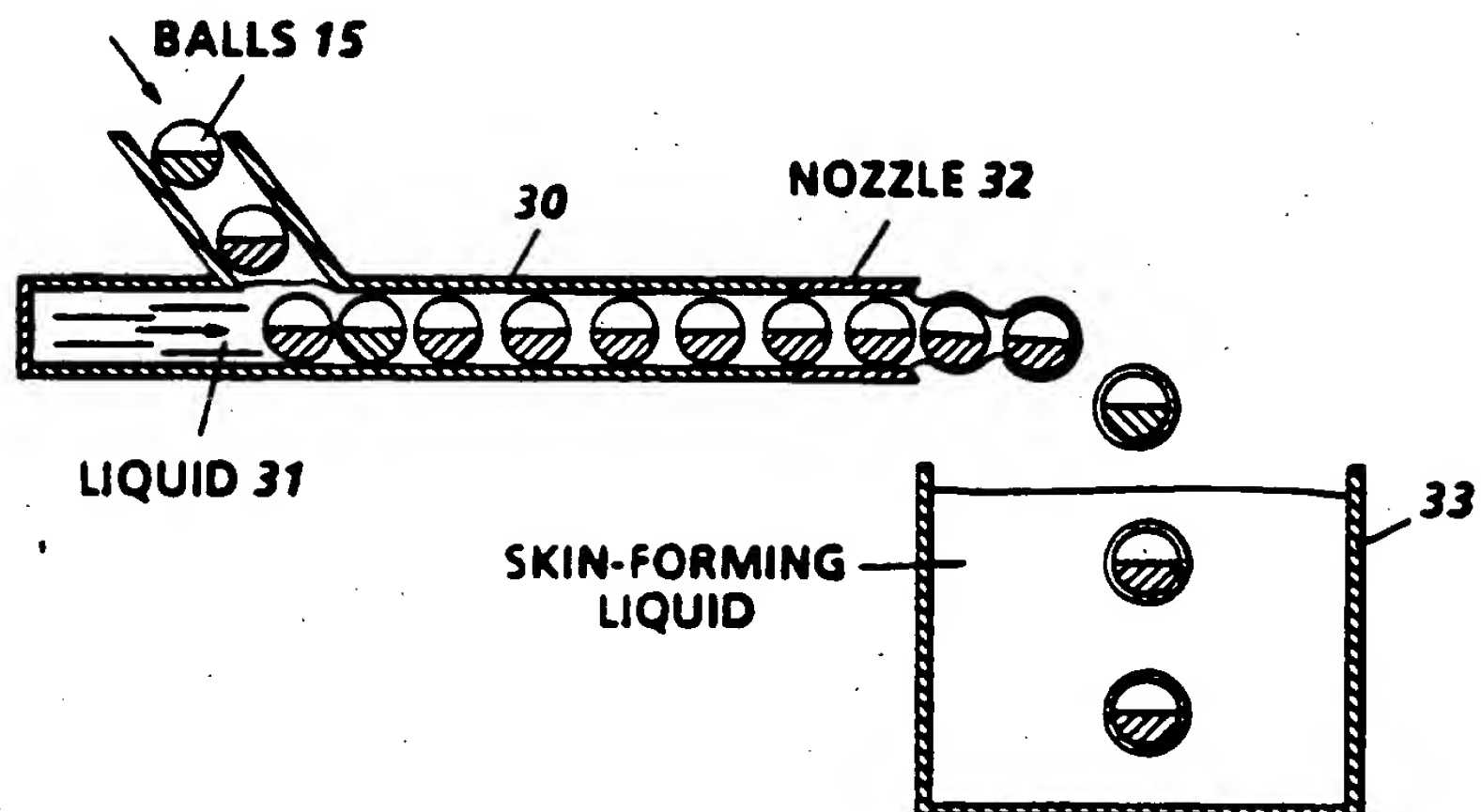


FIG. 9

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(11) EP 0 721 176 A3

(12) EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION

(88) Date of publication A3:
13.11.1996 Bulletin 1996/46

(51) Int Cl.⁶ G09F 9/37

(43) Date of publication A2:
10.07.1996 Bulletin 1996/28

(21) Application number: 96300044.3

(22) Date of filing: 03.01.1996

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(72) Inventor: Sheridan, Nicholas K.
Los Altos, California 94022 (US)

(30) Priority: 03.01.1995 US 368120

(74) Representative: Johnson, Reginald George et al
Rank Xerox Ltd
Patent Department
Parkway
Marlow Buckinghamshire SL7 1YL (GB)

(71) Applicant: XEROX CORPORATION
Rochester New York 14644 (US)

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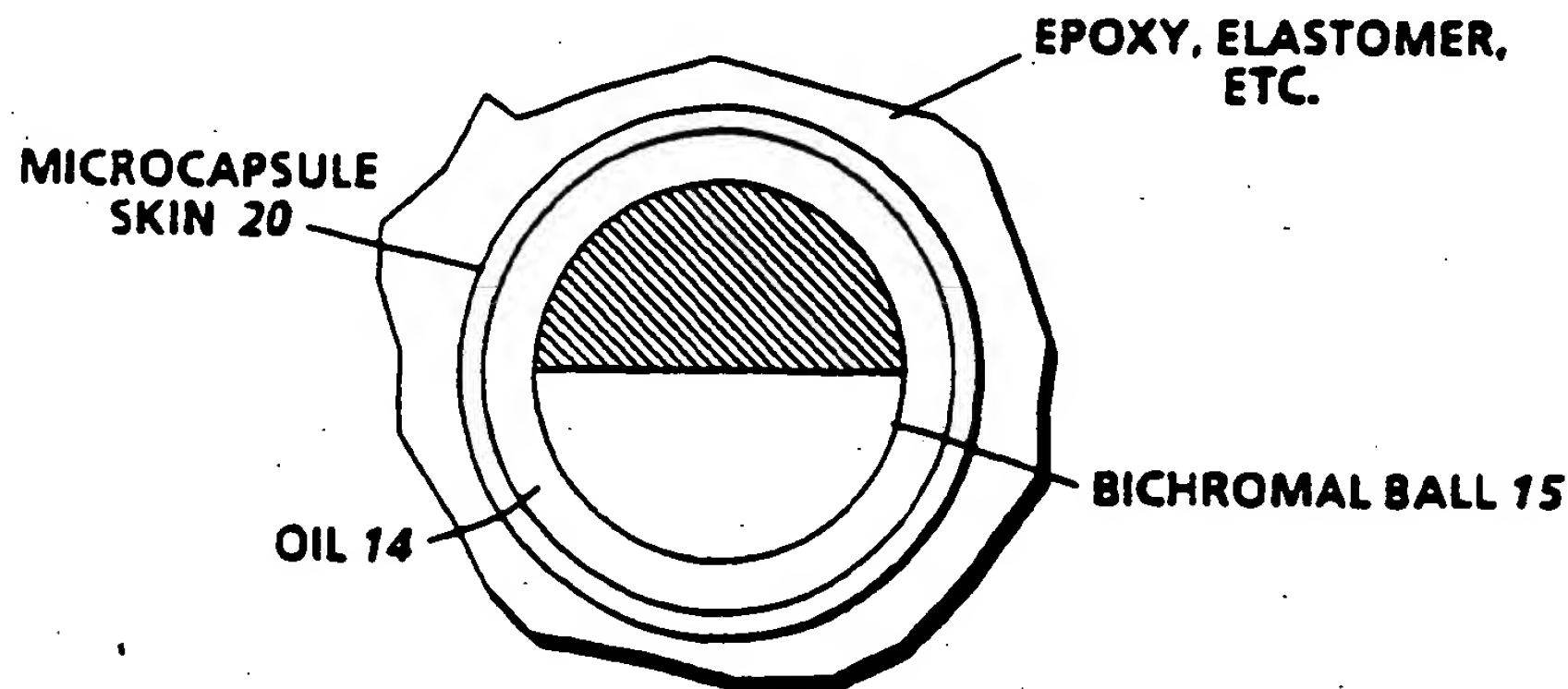


FIG. 4

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